



History Lesson 1 *A New Nation (Grade 8)*

Instruction 1-3 *Early Politics*

Although the new country was called The United States of America, it was anything but united. George Washington toured both Northern and Southern states in a vain attempt to resolve regional differences. And The Articles of Confederation -- the country's governing document -- proved entirely unequal to its task.



First, it put the power of the states ahead of the power of the central government. Which meant that Congress was dependent on the states for funds. It could not enact foreign or domestic policy or enforce treaty obligations. It was even unable to suppress internal uprisings like Shay's Rebellion in 1786, in which farmers from New Hampshire to South Carolina took up arms to protest high state taxes and penalties.

As George Washington put it, the government was "little more than the shadow without the substance."

Obviously, a new governing document was needed. So in 1787, delegates met in Philadelphia to revise The Articles of Confederation. What they ended up with was a completely new Constitution.

The Constitutional Convention of 1787

The 55 delegates to this convention were powerful men. The majority were lawyers. Almost all were men of wealth in land, slaves, manufacturing and shipping. So the Constitution they created reflected their needs -- in particular, the need for a strong central government to protect their economic interests. But the document, like The Declaration of Independence, was written to appeal to less wealthy individuals, too -- the mechanics, small merchants, tradesmen and farmers who made up much of early America. And it is a document which -- with the addition of The Bill of Rights and other amendments -- has served America admirably to this day.



One of the primary areas of disagreement at The Constitutional Convention was the makeup of Congress. Large states wanted representatives selected on the basis of population. Small states wanted each state to have the same number of representatives. A brilliant compromise was reached -- in which Congress was to have a bicameral (two-part) structure. There was to be an upper house (The Senate) in which each state would have the same number of representatives.



History Lesson 1 A New Nation (Grade 8)

Instruction 1-3 Early Politics

And a lower house (The House of Representatives) in which the number of representatives would be determined by population.

The Ratification Process

There was considerable debate throughout the country about the ratification of this new Constitution, especially since it emphasized the power of the central government over the power of the states. Which was exactly the opposite of what The Articles of Confederation had done. Strong support for it came from a series of essays called *The Federalist Papers*, written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay under the pen name *Publius*. In 1789, nine states ratified the new Constitution and it became the law of the land.

These states were Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, South Carolina and New Hampshire. Eventually the other states joined in -- Virginia, New York and North Carolina. Rhode Island was the last to ratify, in 1790.

Immediately after ratification, Congress unanimously elected George Washington the first President of the United States.



The Birth of Political Parties

Although George Washington did not approve of political parties, political differences immediately surfaced in his cabinet. And these conflicts eventually led to the two-party system in America.

The greatest controversy centered around the economic programs of Alexander Hamilton, Washington's Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton wanted to create a National Bank of the United States. He hoped to encourage a rich business community which would eventually pay for the activities of government. His programs passed -- but not without heated opposition from Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, who envisioned a rural agricultural society. Jefferson feared that a National Bank would take money from the poor and put it into the hands of the rich.

Washington supported Hamilton, but persuaded Thomas Jefferson not to resign for the good of the country. Strife continued, however, and resulted not only in a



History Lesson 1 A New Nation (Grade 8)

Instruction 1-3 Early Politics

split in the administration but in the rise of political parties. Out of respect for President Washington, these political parties did not become fully active until he left office in 1789. But here is a brief description of the basic political philosophy of each of them.



The Federalists

Those who supported Alexander Hamilton came to call themselves Federalists, because they supported a strong Federal government. They were mostly merchants and businessmen and shared:

- a belief in a strong central government
- a desire to see power concentrated in a ruling elite
- distrust of the ability of the "common man" to govern
- a fear of anarchy
- a strong belief in law and order (strict laws)
- strong support for manufacturing and shipping
- a desire to move into the technological age
- a vision of a society of rich and poor based on the British model
- a bias toward Britain in commerce and trade
- a "loose" view of the Constitution, believing that the Federal Government had "implied" powers not listed in the Constitution



The Democrat-Republicans

Those who supported Thomas Jefferson called themselves Democrat-Republicans. They were mostly farmers from the South and the newly admitted western states of Kentucky and Tennessee. They would force the addition of The Bill of Rights to the Constitution in 1791. They shared:

- a belief in states' rights
- a desire to see power spread among the people ("democracy")
- trust in the ability of all men (once educated) to govern
- a fear of tyranny
- a belief in individual freedom (mild laws)
- strong support for agriculture
- a vision of a society based on simplicity and equality
- a bias toward France in foreign affairs (primarily because of the recent French Revolution)



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Instruction 1-3 *Early Politics*

- a "strict" view of the Constitution, believing that the Federal Government had only those powers spelled out in the Constitution

After George Washington



George Washington was reelected President and inaugurated for his second term on March 4, 1793. Throughout both his terms, the power of the Federal Government was strengthened. Although conflict had grown between Hamilton and Jefferson -- particularly over the balance of power between the state and Federal governments -- Washington still was able to keep both men in his cabinet. He finally left office in 1797 and John Adams (a Federalist) became American's second president. In his farewell address, Washington warned against political parties -- but they continued to develop. During John Adams' presidency, they became more important than ever.

The first election in which parties played a huge, and open, part was the election of 1800. This election pitted the Federalists, under Adams, against the Democrat-Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson won and became America's third president.

The losing Federalists peacefully turned over power to the newly elected Democrat-Republicans. This was unlike what happens in much of the world where power only changes hands through force of arms. And it proved the strength of the American Constitutional system.

For more information on early politics, click on any of these links:

Summary

You have now completed this Lesson and are ready to do the Problem and Test sections.

You may wish to review any or all of the topics before answering the questions that follow. Good luck!